Read the article below

Find the dictionary online http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0600111.txt

For the letters you are allocated:

1. Find at least one word that is still used today to share with the class
2. Find at least two words that you think should come back into use. Explain why you think this. Do you like the sound of the word? Does it have a precise meaning that our current lexicon doesn’t cover? Other reasons? Try to put these words into sentences of your own

Flash language-Australian identity

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A number of the slang phrases current in St. Giles’s Greek bid fair to become legitimatized in the dictionary of this colony […] the dross passing here as genuine, even among all ranks. [Cunningham1827 *Two Years in New South Wales*]

While delving into the “rorters” and “fraudsters” of the last blog, I rediscovered one of the most interesting dictionaries in my little collection:*A New and Comprehensive Vocabulary of the Flash Language.*Written by British convict James Hardy Vaux in 1812 (for use by magistrates), it’s the first dictionary compiled in Australia. It’s a great read (and thanks to Project Gutenberg, it’s now also online).

The term *flash*is defined here by Vaux as “the cant language used by the family”. His definition goes on to point out that “to speak good flash is to be well versed in cant terms” — and, having been transported to New South Wales on three separate occasions during his “checkered and eventful life” (his words), Vaux himself was clearly well versed in the world of villainy and cant. Both the terms *flash*and *cant*(also *kiddy*) were expressions that referred to underworld slang. In fact, *slang*itself was originally criminal jargon; it only broadened in the 1800s to the meaning we have today (language of a highly colloquial nature, not part of standard speech).

It is perhaps not well known that cant lexicography marks the start of dictionary making — (no one thought of including definitions of everyday words like Baldrick’s *cat*and *dog*until the 18th century). The famous ‘coney-catching’ pamphlets of the 1500s were among the earliest (*coney-catcher*was Elizabethan slang for ‘conman’, and comes from the original word for ‘rabbit’). These dictionaries were novelties to be sure, but they also offered protection (well, of sorts) against rogues and vagabonds. As lexicographer Julie Coleman once suggested, they are the equivalent of today’s burglar alarms and security locks.

Something striking about *A New and Comprehensive Vocabulary of the Flash Language* is just how many of the terms remain a part of colloquial Australian English, and with more or less the meaning given by Vaux. Here are just some of the terms:

*Dollop*‘large quantity’

*Frisk*‘to search’

*Grub*‘food’

*Kid*‘deceive’

*Mug*‘face’

*Nuts on*‘to have an inclination towards something or someone’

*On/upon the sly*‘secretly’

*Plant*‘hide, conceal’

*Racket* ‘particular kind of fraud’

*Ringing in*‘a fraudulent practice’ (a worse article substituted for a superior one)

*Snitch*‘to betray’

*Spin a yarn*‘tell a tale of great adventure’

*Stink*‘an uproar’

*Swag*‘stolen apparel’ (as opposed to other goods, such as jewellery)

*Weed* ‘tobacco’

The persistence of these expressions fascinates me. And why these ones? The few slang words that manage to survive usually intrude into neutral style and become standard usage. Three hundred years ago the words *abominably* and *clever*were considered scruffy slang and were branded in dictionaries (if admitted at all). So too were *grub*and*bludger*. Yet somehow these words have not only lasted, they’ve remained remarkably contemporary-sounding — after more than 200 years still a little “disgraceful”, as Vaux described them.

*Kate Burrige*